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Why Goffman Never Made it into the Swedish Textbooks¹

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Abstract. This paper investigates to what extent and how the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman is represented in Swedish sociology-textbooks and why it is represented the way it is. The investigation has been restricted to central Swedish textbooks during the period 1970-2000 and consequently it does not give a complete picture, but since the choice of textbooks reflects central currents and persons in Swedish sociology during the period, the picture is with high probability valid. The study shows a very marginal position for the sociological perspective of Goffman in the textbooks studied and probably one can therefore also conclude that Swedish sociology has been only marginally influenced by that perspective. In only one of the investigated textbooks is the sociology of Goffman given a space larger than a brief reference and in that textbook Goffman is framed as a kind of critical welfare sociologist. Why is he framed like that and how is it done? In the nineties the perspective of Goffman grows more popular in undergraduate education and in Swedish textbooks published after 2000 by younger, but established Swedish sociologists, the Goffman perspective is given a larger space. It seems as if Goffman, 30 years after his death, is making it into the Swedish sociology-textbooks – and probably also into Swedish sociology.

This paper report results from a study of the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman in Swedish sociology. It aims at answering to what extent and how the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman is represented in Swedish sociology-textbooks during the period of 1970 – 2000 and why it is represented the way it is. In the first section these textbooks are investigated. In the second section the only example of a more extensive use of Goffman's perspective in any of the studied textbooks, are analyzed. In the final section the fact that Goffman's books are widely used in Swedish undergraduate education since the beginning of the nineties are discussed.

Almost invisible

Four of Goffman's books are published in Swedish. *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman 1967) was published in Sweden in 1970 by the, then and now, leading publishing house Bonniers in approximately 4.000 copies and no more². Another publishing house, Prisma, has published the other three books, those books that Jenni Diski (2004: 10) considers to be "... required reading, part of the unofficial University of Pelican Books course on gathering information

¹ The following text was presented at the 2011 Couch-Stone Symposium in Las Vegas and also appears in my forthcoming book in Swedish: *Ritualisering och sårbarhet i social interaction – ansikte mot ansikte med Goffmans sociologi* [Ritualization and Vulnerability in Social Interaction – face to face with the sociology of Goffman]. I wish to thank professor emeritus Wade Nelson for help with the English language.

² According to Barbro Ek at the archives of the Bonnier publishing house in Sweden.

and ideas about the world.” *Stigma* (Goffman 1963) has been published in four Swedish editions between 1971 and 2011, *Asylums* (Goffman 1961) in four editions 1973-2007 and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959) in six editions 1974-2009. The last book is the one with greatest success in Sweden and had, until 1999, sold in about 8.500 copies.³

I don’t know what might be expected regarding the quantitative destiny of a book in the Swedish book-market, but anyway Goffman’s books haven’t been extraordinarily successful in Sweden. One explanation that can be ruled out is that of sociological obscurity. It’s rather the other way around: Goffman is, according to *Web of Science* 2007, one of the most cited authors in the humanities and social sciences, placed as number six after Giddens and followed by Habermas (*Times Higher Education* 2009-03-26). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* may have been more successful than a lot of other translated books, but I don’t know if that is the case. Finally, the number of sales for the translated editions of Goffman’s books does not tell the whole truth, because a lot of Swedes are able to read books in English too.

Let’s focus on how the sociological perspective(s) of Goffman has been represented in textbooks written by Swedish sociologists during the period 1970-2000.⁴ The choice of textbooks reflects central currents and persons in Swedish sociology during the period and therefore the picture drawn in the following is with high probability valid. In the two books by Joachim Israel⁵, *Sociologi 1* and 2 [Sociology 1 and 2] (1973a; b), Goffman isn’t mentioned. In two comparable textbooks, that also have been used in Swedish universities, by authors from two other Scandinavian countries, Norway and Finland, Goffman comes out better. In *Socialt samspel* [Social Interplay] Aubert (1974) makes a relatively detailed presentation of the perspective of Goffman in the chapter on roles. The Finnish textbook *Sociologi* [Sociology] by Allardt & Littunen (1978), published in eight editions during 1962-76, frequently refers to Goffman and several of his books. There’s a lot of differences between these three Scandinavian countries and how to treat Goffman in sociology-textbooks seem to be one of them.

In the late eighties two Swedish sociology-textbooks were authored and Goffman has more space in them than in Joachim Israel’s books but not so much more space. In the anthology edited by Ulla Bergryd⁶ (1987) 22 authors take part, quite a lot of them leading sociologists in Sweden. Only one of the contributors refers to Goffman and his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, but quite vaguely. The second textbook from the eighties was edited by

³ According to Barbro Östbye at Prisma publishing house in Sweden. Data after 1999 are not available.

⁴ Textbooks refers here to such books that tries to grasp sociology as a whole, are written by Swedish sociologists and are used in undergraduate education of sociology at Swedish universities. There are a lot of textbooks in different sociological subareas written by Swedish sociologists, such as sociology of medicine, of consumption, of consciousness, of war, of school and of orgasm, just to mention some titles published in the seventies, but these are not part of my study. Textbooks in English are also used in Swedish sociology courses during the investigated period, for instance Ritzer (1983) from the early 80s and on and Giddens (1989) from the ending of the 80s.

⁵ Joachim Israel (1920-2001) is one of the most famous Swedish sociologists. He was professor of sociology at Lund University 1971-87 and his most internationally known book is *Alienation: from Marx to modern sociology* (Israel 1971). He was corresponding editor for the journal *Theory and Society* in the mid-seventies, at the same time as Goffman begun as one of the editors.

⁶ Ulla Bergryd (b. 1942), associate professor of sociology at Stockholm University. Among other things she have translated *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1971) to Swedish.

Himmelstrand⁷ & Svensson and their ambition was grand "... to give a full presentation of the Swedish society in a sociological perspective" (Himmelstrand & Svensson (eds.) 1988: 13). There is only one reference to Goffman in that book. I will return to that particular reference later because, in a way, it is a key to understanding Goffman in Swedish sociology during the studied period.

In the nineties one Swedish sociology-textbook was published (Ahrne et al. 1996) and there is one reference to Goffman in that book. One of the authors, Göran Ahrne⁸, is, as far as I know, the only Swedish sociologist mentioned in the now extensive international literature on Goffman: Ahrne's (1974) article on role distance is mentioned in Smith (ed., 1999).

The difficulties in reframing Goffman as a welfare-sociologist

Why did Goffman's perspective practically not exist in the Swedish sociology-textbooks during the period 1970-2000? I am not able to give a comprehensive answer, but the fact that the sociology of Goffman hasn't even been criticized indicates that many Swedish sociologists have seen Goffman as more or less peculiar and/or unusable.⁹ These sociologists probably thought that Goffman did not fit into the kind of ideologically convinced welfare-sociology that has been the dominating sociology in Sweden. However, Allardt & Littunen's formerly mentioned Finnish textbook shows us that it is possible to combine Goffman-style sociology with a welfare-sociology that are focusing on social policy, health care and criminal policy. This implies that the problem is ideological - that sociologists working inside an ideologically convinced welfare-sociology believe that Goffman's sociology is not compatible with their kind of sociology. So if you are going to combine Goffman and Swedish ideological welfare-sociology you have to reframe Goffman. The Swedish sociologist Karin Tengvald is trying to do that in a chapter in the above mentioned textbook by Himmelstrand & Svensson.

To do justice to Tengvalds efforts we have to see it in the light of the ideology that at least the editors Himmelstrand & Svensson want to be the character of the book. Himmelstrand writes in his introductory chapter:

"In my introduction we get a glimpse of ... how peculiarities and problems arises in the basis of society and how these problems are presented in education and media ... and how organizations, politics and the state are trying to work and solve them partly successful, where upon new problems develops and the whole process of problem-solving continues to roll through history. Problems are generated, attracts attention, are being solved more or less successfully, new problems are generated and so on. Before us we can perhaps see a relatively harmonic and, at least in Sweden, comparatively successful process of problem-solving, a good circle that takes Sweden forward in history in a sort of ascending spiral." (Himmelstrand 1988: 19f)¹⁰

⁷ Ulf Himmelstrand (1924-2011) professor emeritus of sociology at Uppsala University. President of the International Sociological Association (ISA) 1978-82.

⁸ Göran Ahrne (b. 1944) professor emeritus of sociology at Stockholm University.

⁹ The sociology of Goffman is on the other hand used in other scientific areas at Swedish universities, for example social psychology, criminology and sociolinguistics.

¹⁰ I beg the reader to make a note of the similarity between this process of problem-solving and normal science, according to Kuhn (1962).

Now, how can Goffman be given a role in “the problem solving process of the welfare state”? I think that’s exactly the kind of problem Tengvald is working with in her text “Society and Public Health”. In the light of the social isolation that strikes people that are placed in mental hospitals and other similar total institutions, Tengvald represents Goffman as “... a pioneer of the sociological research that have been studying the institutional injuries that falls upon people that are exposed to such social isolation, in particular the serious consequences for self-image, identity and their means of managing everyday life.” (Tengvald 1988: 684). In short one can say that Goffman is represented as a critical welfare-sociologist who is promoting the freedom of institutionalized people. Another Swedish sociologist, Sune Sunesson, takes a similar perspective:

“During the 20th century the reflections over these institutionalized apparatus of society are developed. The first reflexive themes are reform education and critique of institutions, which reached its climax around 1960 with iconoclasts as Goffman, Foucault, Laing and Szasz, although institutions and education had been subject to criticism during the whole century.” (Sunesson 2003: 83)

Similar simplifications are made by Sennett (2003: 157) when he suggests that Goffman was part of the construction team that lay the foundation for the deinstitutionalization-movement in the late 20th century. Framed that way the essays in *Asylums* (Goffman 1961) can be defined as part of a libertarian critique of institutionalized coercion, of total institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals. Goffman’s description of “... the destructive social dynamics of psychiatric institutions” (Grounds 1987: 476) makes it possible to define him as a part of antipsychiatry as was done on the book cover of the Swedish edition of Goffman’s book *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman 1967; Swedish edition 1970):

“Erving Goffman is one of the really big names in sociology. He is at the moment professor of anthropology and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. In his outlook he rather belongs to the British antipsychiatrists.” (Goffman 1970: book cover)¹¹

Goffman didn’t formulate his critique of institutionalized coercion in political terms, with one exception that seldom are mentioned in the extensive secondary literature on Goffman. Together with Thomas Szasz, professor of psychiatry, and George Alexander Goffman founded *the American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization* in 1970. The purpose of the organization was to raise awareness of the dehumanizing consequences of coercion inside mental hospitals and promote reform. Until 1980 the organization also published the newsletter *The Abolitionist*, whose “directors” Alexander, Goffman and Szasz were (*The Abolitionist* 1971; 1979). Goffman’s analysis of mental hospitals and other total institutions does however not unambiguously place him among the antipsychiatrists. According to Berger Goffman doesn’t belong to them at all:

“There is a little Nietzsche somewhere in Goffman, a moral adventurer less interested in the justice or injustice of the rules themselves than in what breaking them or abiding by them reveals about the risks to one’s sense of self and personal order. It sometimes seems,

¹¹ I find the last sentence in this text amazing as it has no connection to the description of the content of the book at the cover. If you read that description it says nothing that points in the direction of antipsychiatry.

for example, that even Goffman's wellknown 'sympathy' for mental patients and the insane is based neither on their status as victims of family collusion or institutional barbarism, nor on a Laingian appreciation of the superior reality of schizophrenic modes. It is as if he were personally grateful to them for having taught him something about the rules of behavior normal people depend upon; as if those who reveal our rules to us by breaking them (and thereby putting us uptight) deserve our gratitude for instructing us in what we believe in and depend upon." (Berger 2000: 283)

Analytically, Goffman expressed pretty much the same idea in a discussion on the inmates perspective at a conference on group processes in 1956, where Goffman was one of four specially invited guests and his assignment was to open a discussion on "interpersonal persuasion" in which, among others Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Ray Birdwhistell took part: "Sociologists must talk about the point of view of the people they are studying because it is out of this that the world they are studying is constructed. A patient is in a world; he has a social life, and our job is to get within his social life. My job is to tell you about his social world." (Goffman 1957a: 136). And further in the preface to *Asylums*:

"The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members, in this case, doctors, nurses, attendants, and relatives. To describe the patient's situation faithfully is necessarily to present a partisan view. (For this last bias I partly excuse myself by arguing that the imbalance is at least on the right side of the scale, since almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist, and he, socially speaking, is on the other side.)" (Goffman 1961: 8)

And finally when Goffman analyses social interaction as a social ritual and uses interaction inside a mental hospital as a contrasting case to be able to clearer see the overall interactional order he concludes:

"One of the bases upon which mental hospitals throughout the world segregate their patients is degree of easily apparent 'mental illness'. By and large this means that patients are graded according to the degree to which they violate ceremonial rules of social intercourse. There are very good practical reasons for sorting patients into different wards in this way, and in fact that institution is backward where no one bothers to do so." (Goffman 1967: 91f)

In my opinion Goffman's alleged role as a reformer of total institutions has very little to do with Goffman, as also stated by both Shalin (2010), Pettit (2011) and Suibhne (2011). But the opposite opinion are neither valid, for example the statement that Goffman's "... studies of mental illness and stigma created the illusion that he cared for the insane, the underclass, and the disabled." (Denzin 2003: 128). Goffman's perspective on total institutions is analytical rather than normative. That in mind I think that Goffman is saying that inmates represent not only a position, but also a *perspective*. His primary goal is not to brand coercion and oppression in mental hospitals, but rather to understand how the interaction between the individual, the others and society are shaped or framed by the "totalness" in such institutions. The following words indicate just that:

”Whether a particular total institution acts as a good or bad force in civil society, force it will have, and this will in part depend on the suppression of a whole circle of actual or potential households. Conversely, the formation of households provides a structural guarantee that total institutions will not be without resistance. The incompatibility of these two forms of social organization should tell us something about the wider social functions of them both.” (Goffman 1961: 22)

Accordingly Goffman is interested in the forms and internal social dynamics of total institutions and incongruities vis-à-vis other institutional forms and social dynamics. It should be mentioned that among the different kinds of total institutions Goffman in particular is interested in mental hospitals, the only total institution where Goffman himself gathered primary data. Actually his book *Asylums* is more about mental hospitals than other total institutions and he tends to underestimate the differences between different total institutions, for example jails, boarding schools and monasteries, let alone ships and “... large mansions from the point of view of those who live in the servants’ quarters” (Goffman 1961). Mouzelis (1971) has pointed out that there are two characteristics that distinguish total institutions from other institutions: their “totalness” and their formal-organizational character – and beyond that there are a lot of differences depending on whether the “clients” are recruited by force or free will.

As part of the presentation of form and dynamics of total institutions Goffman obviously has to show how, for example, the mental hospital disgraces the inmates as part of the so-called mortification process and tries to take away those tools that individuals have at their disposal to strengthen their selves and take control over their surroundings and themselves. At the same time, Goffman shows that the total institution does not entirely kill the individual’s power, rather forces it to develop in other ways and take other trajectories. The inmates’ resistance against the staff and the institution, the “secondary adjustment” in other words, and the mutual support between individuals united by force, become means for the inmates to gain some control and to set up entrenchments that works as shields for the ego. Against that background Goffman writes: ”Here of course is one irony of a somewhat therapeutic and permissive policy – the inmate becomes less able to protect his ego by directing hostility to external targets.” (Goffman 1961: 59). In her postscript to the Swedish 1983-edition of *Asylums* Malin Åkerström emphasize that aspect of Goffman’s analysis when she mentions those peculiar recommendations that advice people to ”... ’open up’ and ’stop playing roles’” (1983: 299).

In connection to this it can be mentioned that when the American historian William Graebner describes the expansion and decline of a welfare-program called “Aid to Families with Dependent Children” during the second half of the 20th century, he mentions the Moynihan Report *The Negro Family* (U.S Department of Labor 1965), that to a great extent was based on a perspective on institutions that was dominating the social sciences in the early sixties. Slavery was seen as an institution that created helplessness and was compared with the concentration camp. Such institutions was described as powerful “... capable of crushing and defeating their passive and helpless inhabitants” (Graebner 2002: 172). The probably most important contribution to this perspective was *Asylums* by Goffman, but despite that the Moynihan Report shared Goffman’s basic view on institutions it didn’t use his concept of the total instution, Graebner writes and continues “... perhaps because Goffman’s account, for all

its focus on institutional power, also suggested the possibilities and strategies of inmate resistance” (Graebner 2002: 172). Goffman’s contribution was to show the power of total institutions *and* the resistance inside of them.

The analytical perspective towards the mental hospital are also evident in Goffman’s article ”The Insanity of Place”. At the same time this is Goffman’s most emotional text, on condition that it is read as a kind of processing of his experiences of living together with a wife that was mentally ill and had taken her life five years earlier: “... meaningful existence is threatened. ... And that which should not have been able to change – the character of a loved one lived with – appears to be changing fundamentally and for the worse before their eyes.” (Goffman 1969: 374; also 1971: 366f). According to Shalin we are here witnessing a turn. While Goffman before identified himself more with the patient, he now identifies himself more with the family of the patient: “Situational improprieties are framed here in a starkly negative light, with no romanticizing of the rebellious tactics celebrated in *Asylums*.” (Shalin 2010: 4). Goffman is instead studying what kind of social disorders mental illness gives rise to. He shows, firstly, that the mentally ill person threatens the “meaningful existence” of the family and, secondly, does not pay regard to normal rules for social interaction and therefore does not take part of the ritual work that goes on whenever people meet. The ritual work “... that would allow his others to discount this failure”, Goffman (1969: 387; 1971: 389) concludes. Goffman investigates the same phenomenon in “Mental Symptoms and Public Order”:

”We must ask, then: what type of social order is specifically related to psychotic behavior? Psychotic behavior, as suggested, runs counter to what might be thought of as public order, especially one part of public order, the order governing persons by virtue of their being in one another’s immediate physical presence. Much psychotic behavior is, in the first instance, a failure to abide by rules established for the conduct of face-to-face interaction ... Psychotic behavior is, in many instances, what might be called a situational impropriety.” (Goffman 1967: 141)

One might say that these persons lack social competence, if defined as the individual’s ability to manage the relations between oneself, the others and society (Persson 2003) and the individuals’ ability to ritually frame his social interaction with all those little but significant greetings, polite phrases, excuses, and respectful words.

In the light of the social disorder caused by the psychotic behavior Goffman, strictly analytical, also maintained that the true clients of the mental hospital are not the patients: “If all the mental hospitals in a given region were emptied and closed down today, tomorrow relatives, police, and judges would raise a clamour for new ones; and these true clients of the mental hospital would demand an institution to satisfy their needs.” (Goffman 1961: 334). In short Goffman was seeing mental problems as problems that often caused social disorder (see also Scull 2004). At the same time it is essential to be aware of the fact that not all patients at mental hospitals were active in causing social disorder, rather they caused problems of definition. They were challenging the social order not by doing, but rather by being, which we perceive for example in Oliver Sacks’ book *Awakenings* (Sacks 1991).

It is obvious that one can use Goffman when criticizing mental hospitals, prisons and the like, but, as I have tried to show above, Goffman wanted something else: to understand social interaction inside such institutions. In an early text on differences between sociology and

psychiatry this becomes obvious when Goffman writes about Maxwell Jones' milieu therapy at Belmont Hospital in London, where he treated patients "... that are said to 'act out', or to have 'personality problems', or to be 'psychopaths'. I hope that sociologists will ... follow along to see how a segregated social establishment – a 'total institution' – can attempt to resocialize persons already socialized. For here is something quite fundamental. Here one can watch the whole circus of a social movement go through its acts under a single tent." (Goffman 1957b: 201). Goffman was mainly an observer and an analyst and therefore reframing him as a welfare-sociologist has its difficulties.

But - popular in undergraduate education

After investigating the Swedish textbooks of sociology during 1970 - 2000 we can conclude that Goffman is almost invisible. One reason for this is that the dominating welfare-sociologists in Sweden, as we have seen in the cited statement from Himmelstrand above, are doing research in order to make things work better. Consequently fundamental analytical questions aimed at understanding how and why things work, as the ones raised by Goffman, are not seen as useful. So the sociology of Goffman has not been an important source of inspiration for most of the sociologists that have played a dominating role in Swedish sociology since the sixties. The anthology *Om svensk sociologi* [On Swedish sociology] (1987), edited by Katrin Fridjónsdóttir, indirectly confirms this since none of the influential Swedish sociologists who are telling their stories in the book (all of them by the way men) indicates any influence from Goffman. His sociology is mentioned only once and in passing together with other so called sociologists of everyday life. In connection to this it can be mentioned that there are four Swedish sociologists in the generation born around 1940 that have written with some substance about Goffman. I have already mentioned Göran Ahrne. Gerd Lindgren has throughout her career been inspired by Goffman, for example in her articles and books on the working-life in hospitals and relations between different professional groups there (for example Lindgren 1999). Björn Eriksson (2007) has critically examined Goffman's perspective on social interaction, but remarkably loosely coupled to the published work of Goffman. Finally, Johan Asplund, one of the most interesting Swedish sociologists, has written some pieces on Goffman's sociology. Asplund writes for example that he is unable to see any difference between Parsons and Goffman: "The latter has only dramatized the world of the former, has given it multiple dimensions and decorated it with swindlers and fraud." (Asplund 1980: 113). I do not share Asplund's view, but it is worth serious reflection.

It's interesting, against the background of Goffman not existing in the better part of Swedish sociological research, that his sociological perspective – or at least some of his books – since at least the beginning of the nineties has had a strong position in Swedish undergraduate education of sociology. This confirms the following statement by Williams:

"Within academic circles Erving Goffman has received a somewhat mixed reception. It is a curious thing that while among graduate and undergraduate students his following is fairly large, among older, more established faculty he is not taken very seriously." (Williams 1986: 348)

In 1998 a survey of study literature in sociology courses at 24 Swedish universities and university colleges showed that Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was one of the most widely used books in Swedish undergraduate education in sociology (Lundberg

Paldán 1998). Only two books by Giddens and two by Swedish sociologists Ahrne et al and Boglind et al. were more popular. One additional book by Goffman, *Stigma*, was used at one of the surveyed universities. The surprising fact that the book *Asylums* was not used in undergraduate education maybe says something about how the Goffman perspective was used substantially in the sociology courses. Goffman is not any longer reframed as a reformer of total institutions, but as a researcher of social interaction, roles, impression management and identity. I made a follow-up survey via Internet ten years after the above mentioned survey. Data was gathered from the Internet-site www.studera.nu, supplied by the *Swedish National Agency for Higher Education*, and showed a different picture compared to the survey from 1998, as shown below:

*Table 1: Books by Goffman in Swedish sociology-courses 1998 and 2009*¹²

	1998	2009
Surveyed units	24	22
Number of universities where Goffman is represented	11	16
Number of books by Goffman	2	4 (+ Lemert & Branaman (eds.) 1997 <i>The Goffman Reader</i>)
Most frequently used book	<i>The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life</i>	<i>The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life</i>

Compared to 1998 more universities and university colleges are using Goffman's books as study literature in sociology courses 2009. The tendency that the Goffman perspective is growing seemingly more popular, is probably confirmed by the fact that newly authored Swedish textbooks of sociology by younger sociologists, for example Engdahl & Larsson (2006), Lindgren (2007) and Heidegren & Wästerfors (2008), are treating the Goffman perspective more thoroughly. All of the authors are either professors or associate professors, that is: belonging to the more established part of the Swedish sociological society. I think that they are breaking the pattern described above and 30 years after his death Goffman seems to be making it into the Swedish sociology-textbooks – and probably also into Swedish sociology.

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¹² Data: Syllabuses regarding spring semester 2009 and courses in sociology at Swedish universities and university colleges gathered from www.studera.nu 2008-10-21.

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